

The deserter
Second in a series of excerpts from 'A Social History of the British Army in Canada' by Carol Whitfield of the Historical Research Section, National Historic Sites Service. The first installment 'British Solidarity in Canada' appeared in the National Historic Parks News #8.

The British government sent soldiers to Canada to defend it, and preserve it as part of the empire. But the men who garrisoned the posts here saw little action. The periods of fighting or real alarms amounted to less than fifteen years (out of the major period of British occupation, 1759-1870) — the Seven Years' War, the American Revolution, the War of 1812, the rebellions of 1837, and the Fenian raids.

Between incidents, military authorities expected men to be content with drills, guard duty, and a few drinks every night. Books were forbidden until 1840 since they incultured republican ideas—ideas which might lead to rebellion and mutiny. Recreation facilities followed even later, but meanwhile there was not enough money left from a

As soon as a man reached North America there was a flurry of desertions. The malcontents fled at the first opportunity to be joined by those who had enlisted knowing the regiment was soon to be posted to the Canadas. This second group were invariably poor Irish who saw enlisting in the Army as the cheapest way to cross the Atlantic. Once here many deserted to the United States, found work, and saved to bring their families over.

After the first year in North America, desertion subsided unless a "crimp" appeared in the neighborhood. A shortage of Union soldiers during the American Civil War eventually led to universal conscription and even America called up men to lead to serve or provide a substitute. Many of these substitutes

an iron with projecting needles. If he had been found guilty of theft or some other crime in conjunction with desertion, he might also be branded BC for bad conduct. These brandings marked a man for life as untrustworthy and disloyal so that even if he were subsequently drummed out of a regiment for incorrigible behaviour, he carried his record with him, making it difficult to establish himself in any community.

These punitive measures made desertion a hazardous as well as an unethical action. Nevertheless many men risked everything on stealing a boat to cross the Niagara River or stowing away on a boat bound from Halifax to Boston. Stations closest to the border — Niagara-on-the-Lake, Kingston, and Prescott — were the most popular desertion

of those who returned were often circulated to try and deter others. The British army tried many tactics to prevent desertion—look-out parties, the Royal Canadian Rifles, and severe punishments as a deterrent. No doubt each of these methods had some success but desertion continued. The real problem—the contrast between life in the United States and the routines of the British army was never altered. As long as men felt they were locked into a boring, brutal system with no chance to rise out of it except desertion, some sought ways to escape.



"Ambush. Capture of Deserters. St. Andrew's Road, the bridge called 'Bayana' going to the west". Watercolour by Lieut. J.C. Clarke

private's pay after stoppages* for men to buy anything other than a few beers or some feminine company. To put it bluntly most soldiers were bored—their only hope for any relief from the daily routine might come in a new posting, and a new town to explore. But even if the men were bored, the officers demanded that discipline be maintained. The least laxity or disturbance (frequently the result of overindulgence in alcohol) resulted in a punishment out of all proportion to the crime. Bloodybacks was a term which referred to the colour of a man's back as well as to the uniform which covered the welts left by the lash.

Yet relief from this existence seemed close at hand. If only a man could cross the river or the lake or a few hundred miles he might reach the land of freedom, the United States. Desertion was probably easier here in Canada than anywhere else the British Army was posted in the nineteenth century and a soldier knew that he would be deserting to a society similar to his own. Once across a frontier that was partially wilderness he could find a job, settle down, be happy, and never again apply pipe-clay to his trousers.† It was a dream that many men contemplated and large numbers tried to implement.

*stoppages — those items, food, clothing, barracks damages etc. which were deducted from a man's pay before he received it at the daily pay parade.
 †In order to keep their white trousers trim and spotless, soldiers rubbed them with wet white clay (the kind used in making clay pipes). Most often this clay was applied immediately prior to parade which, on a cold winter morning often resulted in severe chills.

were men who had been encouraged to desert the bright red uniform of Her Majesty to don the blue and follow Ulysses S. Grant. These men were sometimes paid large sums of money (one commanding officer reported sums of \$4 to \$700) and helped to cross by "crimps", men who received a commission for finding substitutes. Help consisted of money, transportation and clothes, the latter being particularly necessary. No member of the rank and file in British regiments had any clothes; they were forbidden to own any clothes other than their regulation dress, which was all stamped with their regimental number, and there was almost no way a private could save the money to buy any clothes for his escape. No man wanted to make a dash across the border in a scarlet tunic—he could be spotted much too easily by look-out parties of his comrades detached to patrol the main desertion routes or by civilians who knew there was a £5 bounty for capturing a deserter.

If caught, a deserter was court-martialed, and then sentenced. In war that sentence could vary from the lash to transportation to death. Being transported to the penal colonies of Australia or for service in the British army in west Africa for seven or fourteen years or life was a common punishment. They were first imprisoned in the hulks rotting off Bermuda before being shipped to their final place of banishment.

Regardless of the punishment allotted, a captured deserter would be branded. The letter D would be imprinted on his breast by



From British Military Records "C" Series—"Scenes at La Prairie 1812-13", a hair raising pictorial account of the fate of the deserter in times of war.



A detachment in pursuit of deserters—St. Andrews, New Brunswick. Watercolour by Lieut. J.C. Clarke.

points, so much so that Niagara was eventually garrisoned by a regiment raised to prevent desertion. The Royal Canadian Rifle Regiment consisted of steady men near retirement with a great deal to gain by remaining loyal to the Union Jack for they were mostly married men who were given some relief from the normal barrack room routine. Indeed married soldiers were less inclined to desert. Once a man reached American soil, he became a momentary hero, an escapee from insensitiveness, undemocratic Britain. He was welcomed to the fold, but many found when they began searching for employment that their record for disloyalty and unsteadiness deterred employers. Some joined the American army, while a few came back hoping for amnesty. The testimonies

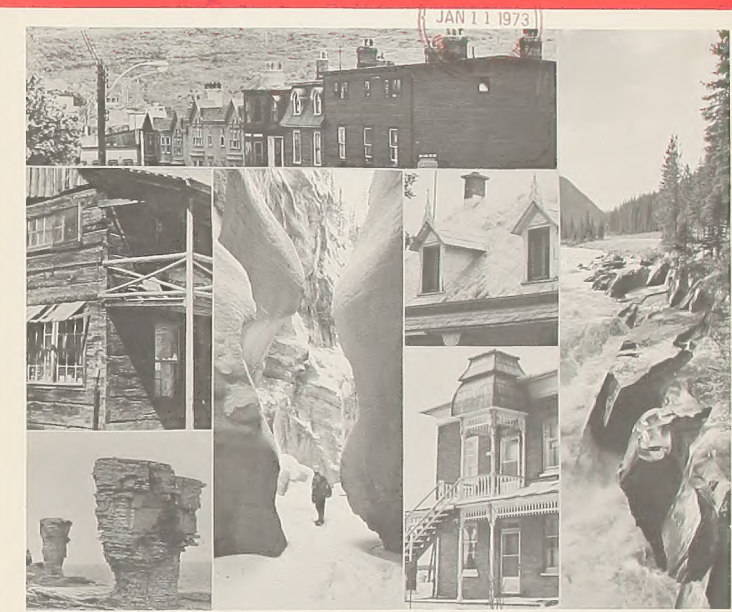
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Preserving Canada's Heritage

Heritage Canada, a form of national trust similar to the successful national trusts in Britain and the USA, will enable the people of Canada to actively participate in the preservation and protection of Canada's historic, architectural, natural and scenic assets. The details of Heritage Canada were announced in mid-September by Jean Chrétien, Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs. "There is an urgent need in Canada today", said Mr Chrétien, "for a new and more comprehensive program for the preservation

of nationally significant sites and structures than is possible with the finances and staff resources presently available." The Federal Government stated its intention to create such an organization in the Speech from the Throne in February. As announced by Mr. Chrétien, Heritage Canada is a non-profit organization established by incorporation under Part II of the Canada Corporations Act. It will be an independent, widely based corporation with membership open for a nominal fee to everyone, to all

Man and Machine... a love affair

These men are even more evident than the first few decades of Canada's railways. No wonder. Between 1850 and 1875 locomotives were splendid machines, colourful creations of bright paint and silvery Russian iron, magnificent things of brass and gilt and varnish. Men polished them, decorated them and gave them pretty names. And, as these photographs show, whenever a photographer appeared to take a picture of an engine, grown men became eager boys posing in front of the locomotive. Look carefully at the men in these photographs, at the way they are standing, at the way they look. They are actors playing roles with the symbol of power as their backdrop.

One of the earliest sketches of a locomotive for a Canadian railroad. Shown sketching this "double" appears on the bottom of an "side-memoir" dated 1839 found in an account book of the Champlain and St. Lawrence Rail Road. It is almost certainly a sketch of the Jason C. Pierce, the second steam locomotive in Canada.



"What threads of life, what hidden histories, What swell of passionate dreams" Archibald Lampman "The Railway Station."



The Wm. Weir, a humble but fleet skulking engine, here finds a rare moment of glory serving as a suitably picturesque backdrop for the impressive Victorian dignitaries collected at the Great Western Railway's gingerbread station at Hamilton, Ontario. Circa 1910

those interested in the preservation of individual buildings, groups of buildings and areas of historical and natural value which are of national significance. One of the basic tasks of Heritage Canada will be the safeguarding of the best of Canadian buildings from the wreckers in order to provide urban intermixes of new and old architecture.

Heritage Canada will have the authority to acquire through purchase, donation, bequest, exchange or lease, lands, buildings, structures and artifacts. It will have the authority, within the limit of any bequest, to dispose of any land, building, structure or artifact not considered of sufficient historical, architectural, natural or scenic interest, to obtain finances for the support of its work. It will also have the authority to enter into cost-sharing arrangements for the preservation and protection of historic buildings, structures, and natural and scenic areas, the continuing maintenance of these normally to be a responsibility of the second Party. Donations and bequests to Heritage Canada will be deductible under the new tax legislation.

Most of the buildings will be renovated and subject to the limitations of any bequest, sold or leased for use as residences, offices, boutiques, restaurants or other such enterprises. It is expected that only a small proportion of the buildings acquired will justify the substantial costs of being restored and opened to the public. In relation to the natural environment, Heritage Canada is empowered to accept bequests and gifts of lands including waterfront areas and can thus contribute to the conservation of such properties for the continued use of the people of Canada.

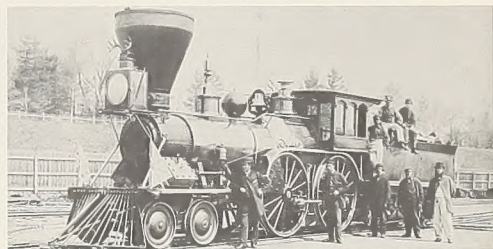
Mr. Chrétien also announced that the Government had agreed to provide Heritage Canada with an initial endowment fund of \$12 million. When the corporation is operational it is expected that it will generate a large part of its own funds to support the expansion of its activities from private sources, membership fees and revenues from the sale or rental of renovated buildings and other investments.

Heritage Canada will have a Board of Governors consisting of 30 members to be chosen from Canada's leading businessmen and from nationally known non-governmental conservation specialists, and be broadly representative of the different areas, the cultural heritage and the bilingual nature of the country.

Heritage Canada will seek close and effective relationships with federal, provincial and private agencies in the historic building and natural conservation fields. It is expected to work with the federal and provincial agencies in providing advice and assistance of various kinds to municipalities, local groups and individuals for such activities as the preparation of restoration feasibility studies, the preservation and renovation of buildings or conservation of natural areas. As an independent national agency, Heritage Canada can also act as a clearing house for the exchange of technical information on historic preservation at the national and international levels.

"The main purpose of Heritage Canada, said Mr. Chrétien, is to enlist the active interest and participation of all Canadians who would like to share in the important task of preserving the nation's historic and natural heritage and who would be glad of an opportunity to contribute their services and money to this cause. It has been the experience in other countries that an active, independently structured national trust can create an environment of citizen involvement which attracts greatly increased public support and participation.

"I am confident that Heritage Canada will attract the interest, the dedication, the voluntary labour of private citizens, Canadian organizations and corporations, thereby substantially supplementing and expanding the work that has been accomplished up to now by almost complete reliance upon government programs and funds" said Mr. Chrétien.



How long did the crew and passengers have to wait beside the vanished car and shining locomotive before the photographer had steadied his equipment in the trackside stubble and was able to capture this precious vignette, "the first train into Meaford Station, 1872"?

These huge drivers will yet tread out the last smoldering embers of discord... will smooth the hitherio rugged path, fill up the dividing gulf, break through the intervening ridge, overcome the ups and downs of life's chequered journey, and speed the unwearied traveller upon his now rejoicing way."

The man who wrote this romantic prediction of the role of the locomotive was a hard-headed civil engineer. The man standing so lovingly beside the driving wheels of the Tremblait, a Grand Trunk locomotive of 1855, was the tough Mechanical Superintendent of the company. The fascination of the steam locomotive had captivated them both.

"I dressed myself from top to toe, And out from Terence I did go; My hair all combed so slick and fine I looked as grim as the Josephine!" "Dandy Gye of the Josephine," a song of the 1850s. The songster called her "grim" another assistant called her "the perriest of Canadian passenger engines," and in 1855 when engineer "Dandy" Cyrus Heckett began driving the Josephine on Toronto's Northern Railway she was one of the latest and finest engines in the country. It shows in the faces of her admirers.

The black cylindrical body, golden brass and silvery steel; Thy ponderous side-bars, parallel and connecting rods, grating, shuffling at thy sides. Thy metrical, now swelling pant and roar, now tapering in the distance, Thy great grinding headlights lit'd in front Type of the modern - emblem of motion and power - pulse of the continent."

From "To A Locomotive in Winter" by Walt Whitman (1876). While the great American poet Whitman was singing the praises of locomotives such as Intercolonial 68 shown here, the less articulate expressed their feelings to the photographer in body language. Both poet and yardman fell the same.

Judging by their jaunty demeanour, the seven men on Midland 7 - from the white-shirted engineers to the minstrel-miming yardman on the tender - were well pleased with the job they had done oiling the gears, cleaning the paint and polishing the brass before allowing the photographer to proceed that summer day in Port Hope 100 years ago. Pleased with themselves as well.

